

# THE GANGSTER

## BY G. K. CHESTERTON

I ATTEMPTED last week to describe something which has not, I think, been adequately noticed about the man who is now the mask if not the mind of Prussianism. I called him a Crank; and yet the word may suggest something more fantastic and even fascinating than anything I mean. I mean the man of inferior culture who is superior about his culture. He is not a wild prophet or a popular poet, or any elemental sort of person, who might consistently defy or despise culture. He is the man who quotes texts, but not the original texts; who relies on text-books, but they are the old text-books; who talks about science, but it might be any sort of science; even Christian Science. But to this character there must be added another, to complete the portrait. And I do not mean it as a mere term of abuse, if I say that such a man must have the making, not only of a crank but of a criminal. Perhaps the modern word that best expresses it is a Gangster. But the title is not only conditioned, but heavily limited by the other title. I completely understand what is meant, for instance, by calling Mussolini a Gangster. Leaving on one side, for the moment, the debate about his defensible or indefensible actions, the Italian Dictator may be a Gangster, but he is not a Crank. Oddly enough, it may be thought, he is not what I meant by talking of a man being lower middle class. As a matter of mere labels, he is lower class. He is the son of a poor blacksmith, and altogether a man of the people. But he is a man of the Italian people; and anybody who has ever seen the Italian people will know the difference. The Italian poor have a natural distinction and dignity of personal behaviour, and even personal appearance; which is not German. Also, they inherit a great history, which is historical as well as great. There was much that can be called brutal or bloody about pagan Rome, as about most pagan things; but the greatness of Rome was not a myth. There was also any amount that was brutal and bloody about primitive pagan Germany; but its greatness is entirely a myth. The huge historic importance of Julius Caesar is a European fact. The huge historic importance of Arminius is a German fairytale. Therefore we find that Mussolini goes back to the emblem of the *Fasces*, which the whole world had really heard of; and Hitler goes back to the Swastika, which no normal person had ever heard of; or certainly not as a symbol of either European or German domination. In short, Mussolini was not probably at the beginning what we call a man of culture; but he was a man inheriting a common sense which comes of a common culture. He was born in the daylight; and the crank is always groping in the dark.

But when we turn to the other aspect, which has been here for convenience called that of the Gangster, we come upon another psychological stratum, which has a character of its own in connection with modern Germany. A vast amount of very wicked rubbish has been uttered under the title of Criminology; largely

consisting of picking out a number of very poor people with peculiar skulls or ears or noses, and telling them that science has condemned them to be criminals. But there is one generalisation that has been made about the principal professional criminals, in which there is probably some truth. And that is the statement that most really successful thieves and murderers are horribly conceited. Their egoism is often much more repulsive than their crimes. And egoism is the most elusive, the most pervasive, and, saving the grace of God, the most incurable of crimes. When a man has had the misfortune to look into the mirror before he looked out of the window, he presents a spiritual problem of the most desperate kind. And that is the real problem of the barbarians on the northern border of Christendom; not necessarily of each of them individually, or of any of them when they are under better influences; but their besetting sin in the sense that it is the sin that most readily and successfully besets them. And it besets them just now to the mortal peril of all mankind; but especially of themselves.

Pride is a weakness; that is the great moral fact which the Prussianised German finds it almost impossible to understand. And yet, though it is quite unfamiliar to many other modern men besides Germans, it is in itself a very plain and practical truism. Pride is a weakness because it is a pleasure; which does not mean that all pleasures are wrong, but that there must be something wrong about regarding a mere pleasure as quite superhumanly and heroically right. We all like to think well of ourselves; and within reason it is a perfectly normal and natural enjoyment, like smoking or drinking beer. But even German philosophers would hardly maintain that it is a sign of heroic superiority to smoke or drink beer; and yet German philosophers have encouraged the notion that it is a sign of heroic superiority to think well of themselves. But if you are enquiring exactly and strictly about who is a strong man, there can only be one possible answer: the strong man is he who can really face the fact that he is weak. Now the Nordic Man, even when he is born as far south as Austria, will never admit that he is weak; he will not consent to enjoy his own pride as vanity. He is utterly and unbearably serious about his own superiority; and that has a direct connection with his long career as a criminal.

Many gangsters and great criminals have been jailed or hanged because of their vanity. The reason is that they are not single-minded; but have a double mind and motive; partly wishing to conceal their crime and partly wishing to boast of it. This attempt to do two opposite things at once can be clearly seen in several Prussian blunders. It has been said that Von Kluck lost the Battle of the Marne by trying to combine the showy act of capturing Paris with the military act of outflanking the French line. And the most unnatural and blood-curdling quality about many of the Nazi



actions is the attempt to brag of brutality, in the very act of assuring the world of good intentions. As diplomats they would disavow brutality; but as moralists they are not really ashamed of it. So Hitler roars through the loudspeaker, "Give me your children or I will come and take them," because while he has the theoretical aim of being a popular educationist, he has also a sort of thrill in being regarded as the Giant Blunderbore. The name out of the old fairytale is appropriate enough; for the man who does that certainly blunders and is undoubtedly a bore.

## Odds and Ends

By J. Desmond Gleeson

### A SPANNER INTO THE WORKS.

IN the early days of motors the law insisted that a gentleman with a red flag should go before petrol-propelled vehicles, giving warning of what was coming and bidding pedestrians prepare for the worst. To be fair, it was not always true that the motor was coming up behind the colour-sergeant, for the works frequently broke down and for a space even the wicked were at rest. Yielding, mistakenly, to pressure of salesmen and public alike, it was decided to get rid of the picturesque flag-waver and motorists thereafter were at liberty to run him down or shoo him off the highway. There is however a very good case nowadays for bringing him back, flag and all. In these days of depression a great impetus would be given to employment if every motorist were compelled to employ a herald to walk before and assure folk that he was coming. The cotton industry would derive great benefit from the making of the few millions of flags that the "danger" men would require. It is possible that the Fascists would object to the sudden appearance of so many red flags; but then they object to a great many things. Incidentally the reappearance of the flag-flutterer would relieve the monotony of having about a quarter of a million persons maimed or destroyed each year by motorists on the highways. A correspondent in these pages, very properly appalled at the growing casualty list, makes the suggestion that a speed limit of 25 miles an hour should be imposed for a trial period to see how many victims could be saved during the time of grace. As a matter of fact, though in the right direction, I doubt if the suggestion goes far enough. It is possible that some people do not realise the temptation to speed when the controls and the wheel are in the motorist's hands. When you have a potential 60 m.p.h. under your thumb it is pretty hard to make it a mere 25. Unless you are going at top speed you do not feel that you are getting the best out of your car, i.e., out of your bargain. As a matter of fact the speed business is entirely unnecessary. People do not *need* to career along at a mile a minute. It all merely comes from the current delusion that going fast is the same thing as getting there. Getting wheels to go faster and faster is believed to be an end in itself. Actually it is more likely to be the end of somebody else. But the point is that there is no necessity for great speed. Minutes are as precious to leisure as they are to haste. To save a few of them at the risk of another's life is

not worth doing. Nevertheless you will never succeed in persuading a motorist that he is not in a hurry. He has it firmly fixed in his head that two minutes taken over a mile is one minute wasted. What must be done, therefore, is to reduce the *possible* speed of his engine to the 25 mile maximum of the correspondent or to the mere 12 miles an hour of my own choice. Motors must be made that are incapable of exceeding that speed; about four times the pace of a moderate walker; the steady pace of a good horse. Twelve miles an hour is sufficient to feel that you are moving and insufficient to make your motor into a menace. People can do just as much business and take a great deal more pleasure at 12 miles than at 60. When they are really in a hurry they can call upon the greater comfort of the trains. Moreover the motorist would probably find that he could get just as much thrill from a car which could only do 12 miles when he put it at its fullest, as from the highly-powered auto at his command. In each case he would be just trying to get the best out of his machine. If the best were a pleasant twelve miles an hour he could still put his energy into it without being a danger to the community. He could still be the violent road-hog of his dreams, thundering through the countryside at 12 miles an hour. He could still be eternally in a hurry, if his hurry is fixed by his own engine at 12 miles. Indeed it is the engine makers who are really the enemies of the people for putting such powerful forces in his incapable hands. It is the manufacturers then who must be compelled by law to produce no engine with a greater speed than 12 miles per hour and—can't you see it being done?

### THE CHARM OF SURREY.

"The Oval always to me epitomises the spirit of Cricket, the keenest members, the keenest crowd, and the greatest consideration for all who attend. What more desirable locality and what more ideal conditions could one desire?" Many will envy Mr. Bosanquet in this neat choice of words which so perfectly describe the finest of all cricketing situations. What more desirable locality indeed! It is common knowledge that the authorities examined the broad county of Surrey with the utmost care before deciding that their wickets should be pitched on that well-known beauty spot, the village green picturesquely termed the Oval. A county so rich in villages and in greens, it was a matter of some niceness to decide which really was the perfect one amongst them all. Yet no one can doubt that the selection was entirely just. Placed so neatly in the centre of the peaceful village of Kennington, the Oval seems to slumber under its full circle of trees. To the right the ancient village church rises, a homely guardian, a reminder that though the green may be given up to manly exercise on Saturday afternoon, Sunday has duties of its own. On the opposite side and standing by itself is the hospitable tavern known to sportsmen throughout the world as the "Pad and Glove." A few wooden benches here and there show that the oldest inhabitants do not despise the games of the young, while a few cows, solemnly pondering, add a friendly touch to the tranquil picture. As Mr. B. truly remarks, what more desirable locality could one desire? So unlike that nasty Lord's with its towering gasworks, in which the